Physician Assisted Suicide in CT

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The legislature in my home state of Connecticut is debating a proposal to permit physician assisted suicide. This is the latest such political battle over the issue. In 2012, Massachusetts voters narrowly defeated a similar proposal in a referendum. The next year, the legislature in Vermont adopted one. Physician assisted suicide has been legal in Oregon since the 90s and in Washington State since 2008.

New England and the Pacific Northwest are two parts of the country known for their "live and let live" cultures so we should not be entirely surprised that some enterprising ideologues took what is, to them, the next logical step: "live and let die." Besides, almost anywhere in America, and on any issue, if you can frame your position as the position advocating "choice" you are likely to win.

The group pushing the Connecticut measure is called "Compassion & Choices." The name is quite inappropriate. In the first place, they are not advocating choices in the plural, but one choice, the choice to take one's own life with a bit of help from your doctor. I never hear this group advocating for more funding for end-of-life care. I never hear them advocating for family leave legislation that permits people to take time off of work to care for an elderly family member as we routinely provide time off to a parent to care for a newborn. And, where precisely is the compassion? It is a word with a meaning?to suffer with. There is nothing compassionate about saying: "Here are some pills?go kill yourself."

I would like to suggest the group consider a third C?coercion, specifically the coercion of cash. In any given family, there is one person who is anxious to receive an inheritance, unwilling to pay, in time or money, for the care an elderly family member requires. An older person, disabled by age or disease or both, is all too vulnerable emotionally to resist a complaint from someone that they are becoming a burden. The Connecticut legislature knows something about the coercive power of cash which is why
they enacted one of the most rigorous publicly funded campaign laws in the country. Surely, if they were alert to the danger of cash in politics, they can detect the danger of cash coercing old folks into wanting to end their lives quickly.

Regrettably, too often the Church and its leaders frame the issue in terms of the moral law. This is understandable: Our ecclesial leaders are moral teachers. But, it virtually guarantees defeat. America’s hyper-individualism is a part of our national myth. With the advent of our spread-eagle consumer capitalism, that hyper-individualism is now a part of our daily experience and, to be honest, we like it that way. Feeling blue? Go shopping! Why muck around in the sources of discontent when a quick purchase can take your mind off it. The reasons for our culture’s obesity epidemic are not entirely physiological. If we in the Church try and defend the elderly with appeals to the moral law, we will lose.

Fortunately, in a state like Connecticut, there are some liberals who are acquainted with real compassion, not the ideology of compassion, and most families have confronted the cross of end-of-life care. For those of us who are Christians, we know that when we encounter a cross, we carry it. This is especially the case when the cross is, as the cross always is, a blessing, the great blessing of loving a family member as they face the specter of dying. The fear of death is its abysmal loneliness, and the antidote to loneliness is companionship. You do not need to appeal to any moral law to know this. The knowledge is innate.

For me, this knowledge was clarified after my Mom, long-suffering from Parkinson’s disease, was in a car accident. Her prospects were grim and she never ate food again and never spoke again after that accident. But, she lived for a little more than six months after the accident. Each morning, I would drive my Dad to St. Joseph’s Center for the Living, in Willimantic, Connecticut, and we would visit her. I would return home to get to work and he would spend the day there. In addition to keeping her company, he would help wheel other patients to the chapel for Mass. He would spend time with his sister who was in a room around the corner. He got to know many of the patients and all of the staff. I would go back in the late afternoon for another visit with my Mom and to pick him up and bring him home. But, his home was there, by my Mom’s bedside. The day she died, March 18, was a Sunday, but the supervisor of the wing where my mother’s room was located drove in to thank my family for the way we had cared for my mother. She was crying. We were crying. There were many emotions in those tears, but I remember feeling then, and still can tap that emotion this morning sitting here at my computer seven years on and miles away, that my mother, whose life was one of dignity, had received a death that was also cloaked in dignity.

For Vicki Kennedy, this knowledge came when her husband, Sen. Ted Kennedy, was told he had two to four months to live. In fact, he had fifteen months. As she recounted in this masterful op-ed, published in advance of the 2012 vote in Massachusetts, those additional months were filled with dignity. And with compassion. Those in the Connecticut legislature who are thinking of supporting this bill should recognize that, as Mrs. Kennedy termed it, they are insulting the late Senator’s memory and his lifelong goal of universal health care. The humane response to illness in all people is care and concern and compassion, not a prescription for suicide pills.

The key to winning this political struggle over physician assisted suicide is not to turn it into an abstract moral struggle. The key is to humanize the issue. The face of a humane civilization confronting difficult, often painful, end-of-life situations is the face of a hospice worker, of a nurse at St. Joseph’s Center for the Living, of a family, gathered around their loved one as he or she takes a last breath.

For us Christians, this emphasis on the personal should come easily. People often say that Pope Francis talks a lot about poverty, but that is not exactly true: He talks a lot about the poor. The other day, I received an email from a theologian friend that included this phrase: “The Center, without whom things
fall apart? ? and the word ?whom? jumped out at me. Our ?center? is a person, not a thing. That ?whom? is our secret insight into how we defend the elderly from this, and other, assaults on their dignity.

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